Culture of Innovation Guide
Tips from Google for transforming school and district culture

Overview

At Google, innovation has been at the heart of our culture since Larry and Sergey first started working out of a Menlo Park garage. Since then, we've invested time and resources into creating and sustaining a culture of innovation. And while every organization has to be true to its own cultural DNA, we hope that some of these principles and ideas will be useful to school leaders who want to more fully incorporate innovation into their cultures.

After all, the culture of a school or district can either encourage beneficial change, or it can get in the way. A culture of innovation helps employees embrace opportunities inherent in change and learn from the successes and failures along the way. It can also help educators respond to the challenges of preparing students for success in a rapidly changing world.

We believe there are four foundations necessary for a culture of innovation:

- Curiosity
- Agency
- Risk-taking
- Collaboration

How to use this guide:

1. Learn about the [Foundations for a Culture of Innovation](#).
2. Send this [Culture Survey](#) to evaluate your current culture and identify opportunities to improve.
3. Incorporate the [Starting Points](#) and [Google Culture Practices](#) into your plans where you think they will be helpful.
4. Periodically review the [Reflection Questions](#) as a leadership team and identify opportunities for further culture work.
5. Go deep with, [Other Resources](#), to learn more about innovation, culture, and how these components work together at Google.
Foundations for a Culture of Innovation

Curiosity

Curiosity is the spark of innovation. It’s the habit of constantly wondering why things are the way they are, looking at them from different perspectives, and questioning how they might be different. People and organizations that encourage curiosity can generate an abundance of new, innovative ideas—plus it’s a lot of fun!

Agency

School leaders can foster agency among teachers and staff by broadening their freedom to set their own goals and make their own decisions. When people are empowered to take ownership over their own work and working environments, they often become more motivated and are more open to trying out new ideas. By promoting a culture of agency and ownership, school leaders can harness the collective intelligence of their entire staff to find innovative solutions to complex problems rather than shouldering the entire burden themselves.

Risk-Taking

Trying ambitious new things is inherently risky; sometimes things simply won’t go as planned. Innovative cultures recognize that considered risk-taking and thoughtful failure are part of the learning process and essential to arriving at truly transformative ideas. These cultures reward people for dreaming big, even when their best efforts fall short. Taking many frequent, small risks and learning from each small failure along the way can help maintain an innovative mindset while avoiding catastrophic failures.

Collaboration

Innovation flourishes in environments where ideas can flow freely between people, teams, and different levels of an organization. After all, good ideas can come from anywhere. Amazing things happen when diverse people work together and build on each other’s ideas.
Starting points
To kick off your culture transformation

Curiosity

- Regularly change up visible spaces such as front offices, teachers’ lounges, and district offices to keep things fresh and inspire creativity.

- Think outside the box about how to facilitate learning and curiosity. At Google, we have mini training lessons posted in the bathroom stalls around a different subject each month (an example of engineers trying to make the most of every minute!). We call these "Learning on the Loo." In schools, employees can volunteer to write a around a topic they are passionate about or that they think would be worth sharing and post these is visible places.

- Organize a teacher field trip to a place that might challenge educators to think differently about the changing the world they are preparing their students for.

Agency

- Watch this TED talk on How to Manage for Collective Creativity. One of Harvard professor, Linda Hill's important takeaways from her study of innovation is that the role of a leader is to, "set up the stage, not perform on it." Unleashing the, "power of the many" in this way opens the door for innovation.

- Make a conscious decision to actively involve educators in all big decisions that will affect them. For example, when planning professional development opportunities ask yourself "What opportunities can I provide to teachers and staff to empower them to grow their skills?" rather than "What do I need them to know?"

Risk-Taking

- Reward thoughtful failure. "Incentives and goals matter, but the act of considered risk-taking itself needs to be rewarded, especially in the face of failure. Otherwise, people simply won’t take risks" (Bock, Laszlo. Work Rules!). Publicly recognize people who take big risks (e.g., tackle big problems, set ambitious goals, try out new ideas), even if/when they fall short.

- Leadership teams can continuously stress the importance of trying new things in service of ambitious goals. More importantly, they can lead by example, taking visible risks themselves and being transparent about what they’ve learned when things don’t quite go as planned.
Collaboration

- When using Google Docs, tag people in project docs (such as curriculum outlines, lesson plans, agendas, etc.) to request input, ask questions, or make assignments. You can do this by inserting a comment with a "+" followed by the person’s email address. That person will then receive an email notification that takes them to the doc. This can be especially useful for requesting input from teachers in different content areas during cross-curricular projects.

- Provide time and space for people to come together to share effective strategies, provide support, and problem solve together. Innovation thrives when ideas can flow across content areas, grade levels, and school sites. Be mindful of opportunities to intentionally mix people up.

- When using Google Calendar, have your site admin change the internal sharing options so that the calendars of teachers and staff are visible to each other (don’t worry: specific events can be set to private if required). Collaboration is easier when everyone can see what others are working on and when they are available. For example, this could help teachers know when they might be able to shadow other teachers.

- Use Google Calendar to set up regular appointment slots to make one-on-one collaboration easier. Regular “office hours” work well for student consultations, parent meetings, one-on-one teacher coaching, and for leadership teams who want to stay accessible to members of their team.
Google Culture Practices

Consider adapting the following ideas in your school(s):

**Collaborative Meetings | How to have collaborative staff meetings**

At Google, we try to cultivate the group’s collective intelligence and involve group members more actively in team meetings. Improving the level of collaboration and shared ownership in your staff meetings can help unlock the innovative potential of teams.

**All-Hands Meetings | How to host a district-wide TGIF**

At Google, we have a weekly, one-hour, all-hands meeting, called TGIF, hosted by our founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin. All employees are invited to attend in person, watch live over Hangouts, or watch the recorded video later. The meeting features a transparent presentation of goals, plans, product roadmaps, failed initiatives, activities in various parts of the company, and an open mic Q&A in which anyone can ask questions of the senior leadership team. As Google has grown, our TGIF meetings have been an essential part of maintaining a culture of openness, trust, collaboration, and innovation.

**Self-Directed PD | How to set up an online learning hub**

At Google, employees have the opportunity to take on-demand courses online on a variety of topics they are interested. These courses and other resources are organized in a centralized learning hub. Many of the courses’ resources have actually been created by Googlers to help support their peers. In the school setting, creating an online learning hub can support self-directed PD and free up in-person PD time for higher-value, interactive activities.

**Peer Expert Hub | How to run a g2g program**

When Laszlo Bock was working on designing a learning organization at Google, one of his guiding philosophies was "Your best teachers already work for you... let them teach!" The Googler-to-Googler (g2g) program makes the expertise of thousands of Googlers visible to anyone in the company. Employees can reach out to other Googlers for mentorship and advice. These internal experts also have opportunities to create and deliver professional development courses for their peers. More than 75 percent of formal professional development happens this way at Google.
Innovation Labs | How to train your teams to "think 10x"

When Googlers design a new product, a new program, or want to solve a hard problem, we are encouraged to think about how we might make something 10 times better rather than 10 percent better. Sometimes, this can be a bit uncomfortable, but it's also exciting and forces us to think in ways that can lead to real breakthroughs. Innovation Labs are a way of formalizing 10x thinking into an organized team process. Google provides a dedicated room for these labs called "The Garage."

Passion Projects | How to support "20% projects" for teachers

Googlers take on, “20% projects” to work on something other than their primary role for part of their total work time. These optional projects give Googlers the chance to experiment, improve, and innovate. They encourage product development, foster inter-team communication, and enhance skills to the benefit of Google and Googlers alike. Within schools, a “20% project” program can empower anyone to start and lead new initiatives or explore new areas.

Employee Surveys | How to run Googlegeist

Every year, Google conducts a company-wide culture survey called Googlegeist. Survey questions are carefully designed to capture data about what Google cares most about. But Googlegeist is more than a survey. The most important part happens after the results are in, when each manager candidly shares the data—the good, the bad, and the ugly—with their team followed by an open discussion of any next steps. Googlers have so much confidence that their voices will be heard and their needs will be addressed that over 90 percent of the 60,000+ Googlers participate year after year, even though the survey is optional and anonymous. Only 20 percent of the questions change from one year to the next so that, over time, everyone can see where progress has been made and what still needs to be worked on.

Psychological Safety | How to lay the groundwork for risk-taking

Google ran an in-depth study on what makes effective teams. By far, the most important factor of team success was a healthy dose of psychological safety. Psychological safety refers to an individual’s perception that he or she can take an interpersonal risk without being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive. In a team with high psychological safety, teammates feel confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea.
Appreciation Platform | How to set up gThanks in schools

Google has a system called gThanks whereby any Googler can reward another Googler for going above and beyond. The reward includes a note to the person's manager, a post on their company profile, and sometimes a small bonus. Charles Shyrock, a Google Certified Innovator at Bishop McNamara High School in Maryland, built a similar free tool for educators modeled after Google’s gThanks. Schools can use this tool (called, eThanks) to foster a culture of appreciation among teachers and staff, which can help build psychological safety. eThanks can also be adapted to reward risk-taking by highlighting employees who really step out of their comfort zones to try new things and effect change.

Ambitious Goals | How to set OKRs

Studies have shown that committing to a goal can help improve employee performance. Furthermore, research reveals that setting challenging and specific goals can further enhance employee engagement in reaching them. Google often uses “Objectives and Key Results” (OKRs) to help set ambitious goals and track their progress. The “sweet spot” for an OKR grade is 60%–70%. If someone consistently fully attains their objectives, their OKRs aren’t ambitious enough and they need to think even bigger.
Reflection Questions

Use the following questions to guide thoughtful evaluation of your school culture:

Curiosity

- How is curiosity encouraged and facilitated among teachers and staff? How might processes and structures amplify rather than stifle curiosity?

- How easy is it for teachers and staff to question the status quo and propose new ideas for improvement?

- How can we encourage playfulness among our teachers and staff? How can our use of physical spaces such as teachers' lounges help with this?

- How willing are teachers to tinker and experiment with new ideas or resources (i.e., new technology or pedagogical practices)? How can we spark more curiosity?

Agency

- How does our leadership team support the ideas of staff and students, providing clear channels for people to propose ideas and innovate in practice? Where can we do more?

- Do our teachers feel like they can make changes in their classrooms and schools without seeking permission? How do we know know?

- Do teachers feel a sense of control and ownership over both their practice and their school environment? Can they meaningfully influence important decisions in the school and district?

Risk-Taking

- How does our leadership team encourage educators to take risks and learn from mistakes? How well do we model appropriate risk-taking ourselves and make this visible even when things don't go as planned?

- If a staff member tried something and was unsuccessful, would they feel confident sharing what they learned with their peers? With our leadership team?

- How does our district reflect on the success and failure of initiatives, ensuring that discussion is open, honest, and free of judgement?

- How can we better reward considered risk-taking and thoughtful failure?
Collaboration

- How frequently do teachers, staff, and administrators collaborate with a variety of people accomplish their work? What systems can we put in place so that people can more easily collaborate across departments, subject material, grade level, and school sites?

- How well do teachers and staff critically analyze each other’s practice (i.e., honestly discuss what works well and what doesn’t)? Is there more we can do to develop this capacity?

- If we asked teachers whether they felt supported by their peers or their leadership, what would they say? Why?

- How easy is it for teachers and staff to find relevant support within the school or district for solving problems or concerns regarding their work? How can we make this easier?
Other Resources

Explore the following culture transformation resources:

- **Google reWork.** Descriptions, guidelines, and tools for adapting Google's HR practices.
- **Work Rules! — Insights from Inside Google That Will Transform How You Live and Lead.** Book by Laszlo Bock, former Chief People Officer at Google.
- **Google Design Sprint Kit.** Resources for answering critical organization questions through rapid prototyping and user testing. Sprints let your team quickly reach clearly-defined goals/deliverables and gain key learnings.
- **How to Manage for Collective Creativity.** TED Talk by Linda Hill, Harvard professor of business administration.
- **"When Change Has Legs".** Article by David Perkins and James Reese, professors at Harvard University and Washington International School respectively.
- **Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All.** Book by Tom Kelley and David Kelley, founders of IDEO.
- **Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard.** Book by Chip Heath and Dan Heath, professors at Stanford and Duke respectively.